

The Mysterious Stone Chambers of New England

Story and photos by Brad Olsen

An Archaeological Enigma: Colonial Root Cellars, Native American Sweat Lodges, or Prehistoric European Structures?



Megalithic chambers at "America's Stonehenge" in North Salem, New Hampshire.

Scattered across four New England states are approximately 800 stone-built chambers, possibly of an ancient origin. These remarkable chambers, found nowhere else in North America, can be circular or rectangular in form, up to 30 feet in length but usually half that, occasionally 10 feet wide and up to 10 feet tall in the central chamber. They are characteristically constructed of expertly-fitted dry masonry stones capped by megalithic slabs. Most of the best preserved chambers can be found sunken into the contours of the landscape. Although some structures are freestanding, the most fascinating structures are accessed by passageways driven into the hillside.

The most elaborate are described as "beehive" chambers, indicative of the conical shape in the central room, supported by a large ceiling capstone. These sophisticated structures sometimes feature "smoke holes" to ventilate the chambers, as well as shelves, benches or recesses incorporated into the walls. Some had blocked passageways and remained intact underground only to be discovered years later when a roof caved in, or a plow or pick-axe penetrated the chamber. It is unfortunate to mention that a vast majority of these New England stone buildings have been torn down for quarried stone, repeatedly vandalized, or otherwise dismantled, destroyed, or abandoned by the landowner blocking the entrance.

A Laundry List of Potential Builders

Early records of the New England colonists make mention of some of the chambers preexisting before they settled the land. Assuming that the structures were built by vanished Indian tribesmen and were free for the taking, New England colonial farmers put them to use as extra storage space shelters. Sometimes the age of the chamber could be authenticated by trees a hundred years old growing into the unmortared walls. The conventional wisdom at the time was that these enclosures were built as "colonial root cellars," or if an old tree dated their age then they were termed "steam baths for Indians." The root cellar and the Indian-built theories are dismissive because they overlook basic facts, such as the passageways being too low and narrow to wheel a cart into, most having soil floors that would rot vegetables, or that nowhere else in North America did Indians construct sweat lodges made of stone.

Let us use the logic test called Occam's Razor to our laundry list of potential builders. The test goes like this: when you have two or more competing theories that make exactly the same predictions, the simpler one is always better. If there is scant evidence for European colonials or Native Americans building the chambers, then who else could be responsible for their construction? Is it possible to contrast these chambers against anything of a similar design? Where else in the world are beehive enclosures located?

One possibility is the ancient Greek Mycenaeans who buried their nobles in beehive tombs called *tholoi*, large circular burial chambers with a high vaulted roof. This is a possible influence, especially since the pre-classical Greeks were contemporary with the Phoenicians who may have lived at America's Stonehenge, a location we will examine later. As for the beehive chambers of New England, like nowhere else in the world, they closely resemble smaller structures found around the islands of northern Europe. The New England chambers are dead ringers for those built by the Culdee Monks of Scotland, England, and Ireland who adopted the building style from their Celtic ancestry.

If we are to follow the prehistoric European theory then identifying the New England chambers' proximity to river routes is another important piece of the puzzle, because almost all of the sites are situated near a natural waterway. The Merrimack River valley flowing south through New Hampshire and into northeastern Massachusetts was a

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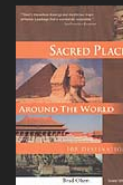
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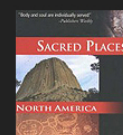
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seemingly active avenue for ancient voyagers, as was Connecticut's Thames River drainage. Because of its long length the Connecticut River was perhaps the most important river route. The Connecticut originates far to the north in Quebec, Canada. It then creates the entire boundary between Vermont and New Hampshire until it passes through the middle of Massachusetts and Connecticut, before emptying into the Long Island Sound. What follows is a description of the four most prominent chamber sites and their associated prehistoric access routes.

The Sprawling Gungywamp Complex

Near the Thames River mouth in eastern Connecticut is a wide assortment of stone chambers, the most extensive being a complex called Gungywamp. This 100-acre site is located in the wooded hills outside the town of Groton, Connecticut, just off Gungywamp Road. A pair of enclosed structures and a dozen other stone features are scattered around the eastern half of an old YMCA camp. The complex is located high atop an imposing cliff, situated above a swamp feeding a stream that connects to the Thames River. Archaeological excavations at the site have confirmed the presence of humans at the site over the past 4,000 years. It is known there was a settlement by white farmers after 1780, and the site was also utilized from time to time by Native Americans.



The entrance to the Equinox Calendar Chamber at Gungywamp, Connecticut

The word "Gungywamp" was originally thought to be an Indian word, but has another translation in Gaelic meaning "Church of the People." Besides containing beehive chambers and a petroglyph image of a bird with outstretched wings, Gungywamp has a double row of stones, just north of two underground chambers. This double ring stone circle, no longer standing, consists of 12 rectangular stones in the outside circle measuring over 10 feet in diameter. The innermost ring is made up of eight stones lying in a tight curved pattern. The complex also boasts a number of megaliths, cairns, a row of standing stones and marked stones, suggesting a possible double use as an astronomical observatory.

The largest underground monument at Gungywamp is called the "calendar chamber" because it features an astronomical alignment. On the days around the spring and autumnal equinoxes an inner alcove is illuminated by an alignment through a hole in the west wall. On these auspicious days the sun shines upon a lighter stone on the opposite side, radiating an illumination within a smaller, interconnected beehive-shaped chamber.



Ceremonial Stone Circle at Gungywamp, near Groton, Connecticut.

The Fascinating Upton Chamber

In the hills surrounding Boston, Massachusetts are a number of mysterious manmade chambers. The most famous is the Upton Stone Chamber, one of the largest and most precisely built beehive chambers in New England. A long passage leads into a large underground chamber called "The Cave" by local kids. The Upton internal chamber is one of the largest intact. The very size belies an easy explanation. A 15-foot long entryway leads into an 11-foot diameter room over 10 feet tall in the central chamber. The precisely fitted rocks of a dry stone masonry have held up well over the years. Virtually no artifacts have been found inside Upton, or most of the other stone chambers for that matter.

The floor of Upton is currently rotted wood planking covering flagstones. An argument against colonial construction can be made that no artifacts have been found, or that the long narrow passageway would be impractical for carting in storage items.

Not only is Upton one of the finest examples of a beehive chamber, but this chamber is aligned to observe the setting solstice sun and stars of the Pleiades, as marked by large stone piles located on nearby Pratt Hill. The Upton Stone Chamber is on private land just outside the small village of Upton, in the backyard of a home on Elm Street, about 12 miles southeast of Worcester. Across the West River valley from the chamber is Pratt Hill where several cairns are located near the summit.



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